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ABSTRACT

English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) practitioners are familiar with adult learners' stories of disruption, political trauma, and mental upheaval. Until recently, however, little attention has been paid to personal trauma and domestic abuse. Acknowledgement of the prevalence of violence generally, and of that experienced by those in the adult ESL and literacy community specifically, is critical to the development of instructional approaches that make classrooms safer and learning more possible for adult immigrant learners. This digest describes trauma and abuse in immigrant communities (concerning mainly women and children), discusses the effects of trauma on learning, and suggests ways in which practitioners can modify their practice to facilitate learning among victims of trauma and violence. A long list of implications for practice are discussed, and among the suggestions to teachers are the following: listen to learners and allow their concerns about violence to surface in one form or another; offer content and activities that allow learners to share as much or as little information as they want; allow learners to choose their level of participation in classroom activities; find out about community resources; and avoid the assumption that all immigrant learners are victims of traumas. It is concluded that although strides have been made in raising public awareness about the prevalence of violence in all forms and its effects upon learning, work remains to be done. (Contains 12 references and 4 resources.) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (KFT)

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Trauma and the Adult English Language Learner

by Janet Isserlis, Literacy Resources/Rhode Island

English as a second language (ESL) practitioners are familiar with adult learners' stories of disruption, political trauma, and mental upheaval (Adkins, Sample, & Birman, 1999). Until recently, however, little attention has been paid to personal trauma and domestic abuse. Acknowledgement of the prevalence of violence generally, and of that experienced by those in the adult ESL and literacy community specifically, is critical to the development of instructional approaches that make classrooms safer and learning more possible for adult immigrant learners.

This digest describes trauma and abuse in immigrant communities, discusses the effects of trauma on learning, and suggests ways in which practitioners can modify their practice to facilitate learning among victims of trauma and violence.

Trauma and Abuse in the Immigrant Community

> ***"In the United States today, women and children constitute approximately two-thirds of all legal immigrants. Immigrant women suffer a triple burden of discrimination based on their sex, race, and immigration status. Increasing evidence indicates that there are large numbers of immigrant women trapped and isolated in violent relationships, afraid to turn to anyone for help"*** **(Family Violence Prevention Fund, 1999).**

Violence against women is rooted in an abuser's need for power and control over his victim (Horsman, 2000; Volpp & Marin, 1995). Volpp and Marin delineate specific ways in which abusers exert power and control over immigrant and refugee women. Such control can take the form of emotional, economic, or sexual abuse and can include the batterer's use of coercion, intimidation, and threats. Loss of immigration status and custody of children are threats often used by batterers.

Minimizing violent behavior (e.g., convincing a woman that violence is criminal only if it occurs in public, or that a man is allowed to physically punish her because of male privilege; or blaming her for the violence because she did not obey him) is also common among batterers both within and beyond immigrant communities. Batterers strive to isolate their victims. For immigrant or refugee women, this isolation is exacerbated by language and culture differences that make finding safe options all the more daunting. While an overwhelming majority of violence is inflicted by men against women, violence is also perpetrated by women against men, within same-sex relationships, and intergenerationally.

Horsman (personal communication, June 2000) posits that while every culture accepts violence to some degree, in every culture people are beginning to realize that violence is no longer acceptable. Thinking that cultural groups must be left alone to sort out their own differences only supports the violators. On the other hand, imposing behaviors or beliefs upon communities will not necessarily change attitudes or behaviors. Adult ESL practitioners are urged to learn more about the laws concerning violence against children, adults, and the elderly; about domestic violence assistance options in their communities; and about culture-based approaches of dealing with the issue of violence and learners.

Effects of Trauma on Learning

"[Traumatic events] can overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (Herman, 1992, p. 33). Since language learning demands control, connection, and meaning, adults experiencing effects of past or current trauma are particularly challenged in learning a new language. They may be affected by symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder, be clinically depressed, have repressed memories of previous abuse, or display visible signs of emotional distress. Victims of trauma may also experience concentration and memory loss (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, 2000).

Implications for Practice

Regardless of an individual's experience with violence, torture, or abuse, being an adult learner is intimidating for many. The following are suggestions for making the classroom safer for all.

- Listen to learners and allow their concerns about violence to surface in one form or another. A class in which a learner-centered approach is used enables community to develop among the learners. It is important not to compartmentalize violence or to frame trauma as a medical issue, but rather to understand its many forms.
- Offer content and activities that allow learners to share as much or as little information about themselves as they want, particularly when they are just beginning to study together. Let learners know that while they are invited to share information about their lives, they are not obliged to do so (Isserlis, 1996). Validating learners' strengths is critical, especially for adults who have received negative messages about themselves or their learning abilities. Using learners' native languages for content learning, activities, and discussion can help build trust and community (Florez, 2000; Rivera, 1999).
- Allow learners to choose their own level of participation in classroom activities. Horsman describes learners' abilities to

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attend to and participate in classroom activity as "relative states of presence" (2000, p. 84). She suggests discussing with learners what it means to be present in the class and giving permission for them to be less than totally involved in all class activities. One way to do this is to set up a "quiet corner" for learners who feel unable to take part in particular classroom activities (Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, 2000).

- Find out about community resources. While teachers do not need to become counselors, they should be aware of appropriate services. Find out what happens when one calls an emergency hotline—what information will be asked for, what language assistance is available, what assurances of confidentiality exist—so that learners will know exactly what to expect when they call. If appropriate, create a class activity using the language and communication skills needed to call a hotline and ask for assistance. Knowing that many hotlines aid victims of crimes (both men and women) can lessen some of the anxiety for female victims of domestic abuse by shifting the focus from them to the broader community. Allow learners to pursue the topic, if they choose, by investigating community resources and by reading accounts of the experiences of other learners. (See, for example, *Not by Myself,* Literacy South, 1999, and *If I Were a Door*, Landers, 1994.) Klaudia Rivera (personal communication, June 2000) notes that staff at the El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York City created collaborations with other community agencies dealing with the issue of domestic violence by providing information about their services and offering workshops to teach learners to become peer counselors. She adds, "For many, the abuse began after the students enrolled in classes. Their partners could not deal with them becoming independent through learning English. In most cases the spouse had not been abusive in the past."
- Do not assume that all immigrant learners have experienced trauma. Neither do teachers necessarily need to know who among their learners has experienced abuse. However, educators should understand that certain topics generally discussed in adult ESL classes (e.g., family and health) can cause learner discomfort because of past and present abuse (Horsman, 2000).

For English language learners who have faced loss of one sort or another (status, employment, family members, or homeland), being able to view the classroom as a safe and predictable place is key to building community among and safety for learners and practitioners. In one Massachusetts class, students decided to meet together outside of class to form a support group after they realized that they shared histories of abuse. They subsequently produced a videotape and guide to document for others their experiences and the information they gained about domestic violence (Hofer, Haddock, Swekla, & Kocik, 1998).

Conclusion

Although strides have been made in raising public awareness about the prevalence of violence in all forms and its effects upon learning, work remains to be done in the areas of teacher education, policy, and increased awareness among learners and practitioners in ESL programs. State plans for adult education might support development of ancillary services for learners attending classes for whom violence is a factor in learning. This, coupled with teachers' understanding of the effects of trauma on learning, should help to make the classroom a safe place and learning more possible for adult language learners.

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Isserlis, J. *On the screen.* Resources for victims and survivors of abuse. http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/screen.html

National Domestic Violence Hotline. A help line for immigrant women. 800-799-7233; http://www.ndvh.org

Peppercorn Books & Press. Publications for teachers of ESOL. 877-574-1634; http://www.peppercornbooks.com

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